

A Prayer for the Ones Who Remain Behind

When the casseroles have been reheated and the freezer is bare,
you remain, O God.

When the lights go out in the carpeted halls,
where we remembered our loved ones and cried,
you are there.

When the tears create familiar trails down our cheeks,
you are there.

When our limbs and hearts grow numb,
not allowing us to feel anything at all, you are there.

When the gifts and cards stop and the flowers die, you are there.

When we bury our noses in the fibers of their old clothes,
searching for the scent of their presence, you are there.

When our faith bows beneath the weight of our *whys*,
you graft us into your tree of life.

When our hope that things will go back to “normal” fades,
like early evening light, you give us a new future.

When our love for the one who died reverberates out for an answer,
you call out our names.

What remains, God, in the ashes of our grief?

What remains, God, in the hollow echoes of loss?

Where could we go that you would not follow?

If we make our bed in darkness, with oceans of tears around us,
you are there.

If we fly above the clouds and dance around with birds,
you are there.

You remain.

PART 1

THESE THREE REMAIN

*Faith, hope, and love
are characteristics of God we can see
in our past, present, and future lives
as grieving people.*

DAY 1

FAITH IS THE FIRST STEP

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. —Jeremiah 17:8 NIV

On a cold day in February, my sister and I drove three hours to our hometown to wait. We sat on plastic-cushioned chairs in the hospital lobby. My dad would soon exit the elevator with an update on my mom's diagnosis. The illness began quietly with a simple cough in her chest, then falling asleep earlier than normal, and finally, her left leg suddenly stopped working at random moments. When my dad sat beside us that day, he spoke softly, but the message was a loud and horrible noise: stage four lung cancer. Six months to live.

These moments are heavy.

Perhaps your own story of sorrow starts in a similar way. An unexpected diagnosis. A crushing loss. A goodbye you never wanted to say. A sudden breaking point that led to a giant chasm of pain.

My legs burned that day in the hospital lobby. I looked down at the sparkling blue engagement ring on my finger. I wanted to run away so badly—to run out of the lobby and straight toward my happy ending that I had always hoped for, dreamed for, and prayed for. I wanted to feel the sting of winter wind on my face and not the sterile air of St. Peter’s Hospital. I wanted to flee from the news that my mom had only months to live. I needed decades with her.

Just a few weeks before this, I had stepped into the perfect white dress in a bridal store and twirled in front of the full-length mirror. All hope, and no grief. All promise, with no death. And my mom had jumped up and down beside me with happy tears. I wanted to run toward the fantasy of a perfect wedding as a beautiful bride with a supportive, healthy mother watching with joy spread across her face.

What keeps you grounded in moments like this? What reminds you to take small, sure steps even when you are scared and heartbroken? When we have faith, God reminds us that he promised never to leave us. Faith invites us to stay and be present because God doesn’t run away. He sustains us even in times of drought.

I started my twenties at a sprint only to realize that life is a marathon that requires strength, perseverance, and lots of faith. Faith sustained me to reach beyond my own limitations and to find strength in Jesus so I could become a tree planted by streams of water with deep roots.

Even though I wanted to run away from that hospital lobby that day—run away from my grief, my family, and the hard things that would follow—I stayed, prompted by the Holy Spirit to take small steps toward my mom’s hospital room. I climbed in the hospital bed beside her and, for a moment, we laughed together about silly things like we always had.

Dear Jesus, I want to run away from difficult news.

Please plant me like a tree by your river.

*Grow my roots and my faith deep so that I might
remain still and green during these devastating,
life-altering moments.*

*Be my home when my own feels like it is crumbling
around me.*

Be my living water in times of drought. Amen.

DAY 2

HOPE IN THE BREAKING

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” —Luke 22:19 ESV

My dad stood in front of a conference room filled with fleece-clad government employees who spent most of their days working outside. A young coworker of theirs had died recently from a tragic and horrific machinery accident. *What should I share?* he thought, running hand through brown hair peppered with gray. My dad worked as a counselor for Washington state workers, and part of his job was to facilitate a safe space for people to process their grief when a crisis arose. The people before him were the ones who had spent their days tending to and protecting Washington State’s natural resources, parks, and living things. Cascading waterfalls, vibrant rivers, and tender shoots of grass were all under their jurisdiction.

The nature of my dad’s job meant that he could never volunteer too much information about his day to me, but if I saw

headlines of a judge getting bomb threats, a ferry worker dying in a fall, or a suicide on a state college campus, I knew there was a good chance he was debriefing the government workers involved. He shared bits and pieces of this day with me, and I filled in the rest with my imagination.

“Our bodies are like walnuts falling from a tree,” he told them. The words came slowly, thoughtfully. “When we die, the outer shell is broken.” He brought his hands together and paused for a moment. “Death is a natural part of this life. And when our bodies fade, the interior part of our souls still endures.” Like the seed inside the walnut is buried to start new growth, our souls remain and endure even after our bodies decay. It had been one year since he lost my mom, and he had spent time considering death from many angles. He had never been afraid to speak the truth at his job, but in the months following my mom’s death, his speech became punctuated by bold wisdom. Soon after my dad finished his brief introduction, he opened up the floor for people to share their grief. When he began, this group sat still and quiet, like faded stones on a salty beach. After the metaphor of the walnut, however, each person started to open up like young leaves growing toward the sun. Healing could finally begin.

Death is a natural and expected part of life, like walnuts whose shells are created to crack in order to release a new seed of growth. I know that breaking open is inevitable. I’ve seen people I love die, but I know that death is not the end. Jesus stands before us and offers up his broken body, sacrificed on a beautiful tree that we twisted into a tool of death. He holds up a walnut—an ordinary brown color with soft, black veins running through its sides—and reminds us, “These three remain: faith, hope, and love. I remain.” Jesus stands with us—a seed of hope planted within our souls. Even though we may break, he will endure. He reminds us that his hope is unbreakable.

Dear Jesus, thank you for never shrinking away from death and for becoming a human willing to be broken for us.

You said, "This is my body, which is given for you" as you broke apart the bread.

You know what it's like for me to exist in this fragile shell of my body.

Protect and comfort my soul as I remember that death is a part of this world.

Help me to be unafraid to talk about death with others. Amen.

DAY 3

LOVE CHEERS YOU ON

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith. —2 Timothy 4:7 NIV*

My brother crumpled with exhaustion as he crossed the finish line. My dad embraced him in a big hug as the harsh Montana wind cut across our faces. It was my brother's last cross-country race of his collegiate career. My dad, older sister, and I drove for twenty-four hours on roads with mountain views and past elk herds just to watch this race. The memory of my mom's love was like a heavy jacket that day that provided warmth for our hearts. We were being folded like origami paper into new shapes. We had crossed the first big milestone without her.

The following Christmas, my sister gifted my dad a framed black-and-white photo of this moment with my brother. My dad is smiling, and the weariness and relief is evident on my brother's lean face. It sits on top of my dad's upright piano, a snapshot of a proud father holding up his child.

God not only celebrates with us at each finish line; he runs beside us the whole time. At the end, he receives us with the words: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matthew 25:23 NIV). Isaiah 40:30 tells us that “even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion” (NLT). Grief does not discriminate based upon age or abilities. Even the youngest and strongest among us fall under its weight. But God says that “those who trust in the LORD will find new strength” (Isaiah 40:31 NLT), and that is a promise for each one of us. Each day that we get up and choose to continue to love others and love God is a race well run. At the end of each day, we can collapse into the loving arms of our Father for he will always remain by our side.

*Dear God, give me the strength and perseverance to
get through today.*

I trust in you.

*Let the memory of my loved one be a comfort and
an encouragement to continue in your love.*

*Cheer me on when I grow tired and need to persevere
to the finish line.*

*One day, I know I will stand before you and
you will tell me that I have “fought the good fight,
I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”
Amen.*

DAY 4

REMAIN BY GOD'S SIDE

We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. —2 Corinthians 4:8b–9 MSG

I was struggling to get the whisk attachment out of the mixing bowl when my coworker hit me with the question I hoped no one would ask that day: “Are you going to see your mom this weekend?” We stood side by side in the galley kitchen, making whipped cream to top cheesecakes. Mother’s Day was two days away, and all I wanted to do was bury myself under the covers, eat chocolate, and enjoy the movies my mom and I used to watch together.

My coworker had unwittingly stumbled upon a painful conversation topic for me. I took a deep breath and replied, “Actually, she passed away last summer. So, I’m having a low-key weekend at home.” She immediately said how sorry she was and gave me

a kind look. We moved on to safer topics of conversation and began dolloping large clumps of whipped cream into the center of the cheesecakes. As I smoothed my spatula from the center of the cake outward to create a perfect spiral, I was hit with the realization that my mom would have been so proud of me. I imagined her saying, “My little Trina, of course you’re making cheesecakes. You always loved dessert!”

Making whipped cream takes time. You have to agitate the heavy cream in a mixer until it forms stiff peaks. Agitation and resistance are part of the process. When an everyday moment triggers grief, it can feel like we’re stuck in a mixer. Grief can turn us around, leaving us disoriented and feeling small. Even though we can feel battered and surrounded by grief’s waves, God remains there with us. He does not beat us down but builds us up through the process of refinement. He was churning my troubled soul into peaks of peace. I held my breath in the days leading up to each of those first anniversaries, holidays, and milestones without my mom. I steeled myself for the inevitable questions from well-meaning people. I was mixed up in grief, but God knew my troubles as folding me into his never-ending, faithful love.

*Dear God, I don't always know what to do or say,
but I know you are never uncomfortable or
awkward with my grief.*

*Even though “we have been surrounded and battered
by troubles; ... we’re not sure what to do, but we
know that God knows what to do” (2 Corinthians
4:9 MSG).*

You do not beat me down but build me up.

I lean into your strength and love today. Amen.

DAY 5

REMAIN FULL OF
GRACE AND JOY

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

—Matthew 6:28 NIV

My feet pounded the pavement and bright pink splotches colored my cheeks as I flushed with exertion. “Just one more hill!” My sister egged me on, running a few steps ahead of me. “Just one more hill until my face looks like a tomato,” I thought to myself. The months my family and I spent taking care of my mom during her cancer were filled with lots of sitting—sitting beside my mom at doctor’s appointments, sitting with her on the couch watching movies, and sitting on long car rides with my sister commuting back and forth to my parents’ house. My physical health had been pushed to the side like a wildflower

struggling for purchase by the highway. It felt physically and mentally painful to begin caring for my body again.

As I jogged into the driveway of my sister's house, breathing hard and sweating buckets, my husband, Jesse, came out of the front door and said, "Hey! You look so cute." I realized in that moment that I needed to extend the same grace and joy that Jesse extended to me to myself. There is no race toward healing, just small steps in the right direction. Will I ever have the same care-free spirit I used to, running unburdened and strong like I did before mom died? Maybe I will. Maybe I will not. Either way, it was time to start letting the weight of caring for my mother go.

I had carried the mental load of her sickness for the four months leading up to her death, and part of me was worried that if I took care of myself, it would mean she was really gone. God spoke to me as I began to walk and cool down that day. "Look at the daisies," he said, "how they are clothed in the finest dresses every day. Why are you so worried about yourself?" If even the humble roadside daisy is cared for by God, how much more so are we?

*Dear God, you clothe the flowers of the field in the
finest clothing and provide all that they need.*

*If you take so much care for temporary wildflowers,
how much more must you care for me?*

*Help me take steps toward mentally and physically
caring for myself again.*

*You always extend grace and joy toward me
and take on my heavy burdens. Amen.*